
Prairie Spass: The Folk Humor of North Dakota's Germans From Russia

by Ronald Vossler

There are three things which are real: God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension. So we must do what we can with the third.

From The Ramayana, Sanskrit Epic of India

There are more than a few books about German-Russian culture and traditions, but the folk humor of this distinctive people remains relatively unexamined.¹ In fact, the stereotype exists that German-Russians, known for their work ethic, are generally humorless. When I told colleagues at the University of North Dakota that I was studying German-Russian humor, several of them, trying to be funny, could only reply, "That shouldn't take you long."

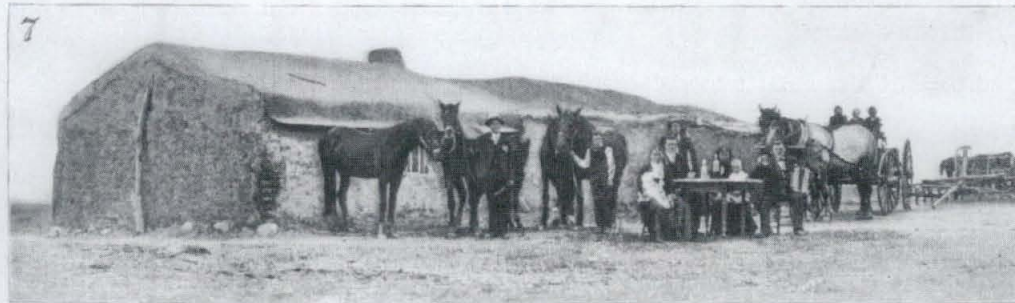
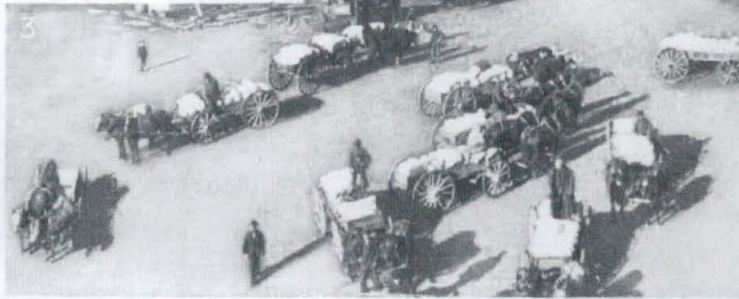
Over a period of six months I gathered examples of German-Russian humor from written sources, both new and old, from tape recordings, from friends, recent acquaintances, and family members. Not until, as the old saying goes, "I'd educated myself right up to the horns," did I realize the extent and variety of German-Russian humor. Much had already been lost; it was not passed to the next generation, but instead was locked away in an obscure dialect few any longer spoke, or in people's memories. The process of transcribing and translating the material into English enhanced my own knowledge of German dialect, and, at the same time, sparked the memories of jokes, quips, and sayings that were so much a part of my own childhood.

This study, seeks to categorize what remains of the rich variety of this ethnic group's humor and to examine some of the broader cultural and historical factors that might have shaped the humor, including its similarities to Jewish humor. Finally, this essay explores the place

of humor in a modern, multicultural, democratic society.

Much of the material gathered for this project occurred in the German dialect. The form of the dialect spoken by German-Russians—something called *Umgangsprache*—is intimately connected with the humor. The word *Umgangsprache* sounds like it could be one of those exotic-sounding foods so dear to the German-Russian palate, akin to *Koladetz* (pickled pigs' feet), or *Schwatamaga* (head cheese). In reality, it is a term linguists use to describe language in which neutral terms can be replaced with emotionally charged expressions.² So *Umgangsprache* is just a fancy way of saying that, after I'd tracked mud onto my grandmother's clean linoleum floor, instead of politely asking me to go outside and wipe my boots, she would announce, in a combination of cranky humor and correction, "*Yah du glana Hossaschissa, ich sot dich aus dem Haus ins Schneebank gschmissa*" ("You little pants pooper, I should throw you out into the snowbank.") It is this German dialect which, at the most fundamental level, shapes the folk humor of the German-Russians.

German-Russian culture, both on the Russian steppes, and the American prairie, had a wide variety of folk proverbs. Scholars, notably Shirley Fischer Arends and Joseph Height, have included extensive lists of these folk proverbs in their books.³ These folk proverbs, which illustrate German-Russian cultural beliefs and attitudes, date back to eighteenth-century Germanic provinces, and are, possibly, the earliest evidence of German-Russian humor. Their sheer number and variety give an indication of the depth of German-Russian folk culture. Some of the more vivid proverbs



The German-Russian immigrants who came to Dakota Territory settled in what is now southeastern North Dakota and northeastern South Dakota. This photo montage captures life for the German-Russian colony at Eureka, South Dakota, and originally appeared on page 689 of Harper's Weekly, July 11, 1896.



The guests at a German-Russian wedding posed for this panoramic photograph, ca. 1915. SHSND C-3565. Left: Another German-Russian bridal couple, Jacob and Lydia Kirsch, pose for their formal wedding photograph. The bride is wearing a homemade bridal wreath made of wax. SHSND 1037-9



include:

Better a louse in the cabbage than no meat at all.

You can't pull hair from a frog.

You always give the meanest dog two pieces of meat.

These proverbs are not found only in books. On the prairie, German-Russian settlers and their children, including my mother and grandmother, used them in daily life, to pass to future generations distilled peasant wisdom, and, also, to have a little fun. Once, commenting on two rather eccentric people who were getting married, my grandmother said, "Yah, even a crooked pot has a cover."

These proverbs are only one part of German-Russian humor. One scholar, noting the rich mother wit of the

German-Russian colonists in Russia, and their quickness with repartee, has also indicated that the wide variety of jokes, insults, wisecracks, and puns were part of daily German-Russian life. There is even a saying that demonstrates their attitude about joking and fun: "*Wer nit kann Spass verstehen, soll nit unter die Leute gehen*" ("Whoever can't take a joke, shouldn't go among people.")⁴

This past summer, in Wishek, North Dakota, at my hometown centennial celebration, I overheard a conversation about someone who had married for the third time. "Well, you know what they say," one person said with a hearty laugh. "The first wife is from God. The second wife is from man. The third wife—that one is from the Devil." If that wasn't a folk proverb, it should have been, for its hard-edged brevity seemed typical of much German-Russian short humor. German-Russians, are sometimes described as having a hard nature, but also a great belief in God. Both of those elements were often reflected in their humor, which could be used to remind later generations, in memorable terms, how to behave. In the following one-liner, which, out of propriety, I will leave untranslated, young women who wore their skirts too short were not so subtly reminded of their transgressions: "*Sieht mir nuff an der scheiss hoga*." Or, if a son returned home from the army or college with "newfangled" ideas, the father might bellow, "*Hans, du hosch Ideen da dee Hunda dobei frecka*" ("Hans, your dumb ideas make the dogs croak.")⁵

The German colonist in Russia was much given to taunting and teasing; he was not afraid to apply his "riotous vocabulary of nicknames, epithets, and jibes



... to lampoon human foibles and frailties."⁶ Current political correctness might cast a negative view on such name-calling and teasing, or even on the often hard-edged humor of the German-Russians in general. But these practices were, for a variety of reasons, a part of this ethnic group's culture and world view.

It should be explained that praise and compliments—perhaps because they were thought to tempt fate and lead to the sin of pride—were not generally used to correct, comment on, or influence behavior. Teasing, jibes, and jokes were used in their stead. Terms that, depending on tone and circumstance, could be used as terms of endearment, for teasing, or applied to someone caught in some mischief, included *stinkkatz* (skunk), *vergrupta Apf* (crippled monkey), and *arschkarps* (pumpkin butt). One pastor to a German-Russian congregation remarked that the German-Russians' understanding of "words, stories, sermons, and jokes is markedly at variance with the point of view of American or the native Western European."⁷

In most German-Russian communities permanent nicknames often were used. Volga Germans called these *Beinamen*: nicknames, usually based on physical

traits or behavior, and used to discreetly swap news or gossip. In Russia, in both the Volga and Black Sea areas, there was much intermarriage and little variation in naming children; therefore, a nickname provided a sense of individual identity. Volga Germans still living in Russia, when asked why they used so many nicknames, replied, "To keep each other straight."⁸

Nicknames also enlivened everyday German-Russian life with a dash of humor. Some nicknames were comic; however, the recipient of them—branded forever by some momentary indiscretion, or because of a notable physical defect—might not have thought them so funny. On one list of nicknames common among Volga German villagers was a short fat person known as *Sackvollsand*, literally "sack full of sand," and another elderly Volga German known as *Nudel Deppler*, or "Noodle Stepper." Some said that *Nudel Deppler* was given this name as an old man because he took slow, tiny steps, no bigger than finely cut noodles. Another version of how he got his nickname, which indicates the long memory inherent in German-Russian village life, was that many years earlier, as a barefoot toddler, he had stepped on some egg noodles his mother placed on a wooden bench to dry.⁹

Similarly, in Wishek—located in the heart of what is known as "the German-Russian triangle," twenty-three counties in North Dakota where German-Russians settled heavily, and where their descendants still live—there were, in mid-century, a variety of nicknames in use. The following are several of the more innocuous nicknames from my personal experience: *Schlang*, or snake, was a high school basketball player with deceptive, snake-like movements on the court; *Winegar* was a fellow with an accent who'd jammed his "tumb" in football practice, and, on the day of the big homecoming game, showed up brandishing his ailing member, saying that it was in fine shape because, as the old remedy indicated, he'd given it a good overnight soak in a cup of "winegar"—thus his nickname.

1. For background information about this ethnic group's origin, history, and culture, see Timothy Kloberdanz, "Volksdeutsche: The Eastern European Germans," in *Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History*, eds. William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1988), 121-155. Also, for a cogent examination of Germans from Russia in North Dakota, see two articles by Gordon Iseminger: "The McIntosh County German-Russians: The First Fifty Years," *North Dakota History* 51:3 (1984): 4-23; and "C. C. Becker: McIntosh County German-Russian Pioneer," *North Dakota History* 50:3 (1983): 2-16.

2. For an examination of intermediate linguistic forms, and their characteristics, see R. E. Keller's *The German Language* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978), 517-523.

3. Two of the most extensive lists of folk proverbs occur in Shirley Fischer Arends' *The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University

Press, 1989), 174-193, and Joseph S. Height's *Homesteaders on the Steppe: The Odyssey of a Pioneering People* (Ann Arbor: McNaughton and Gunn, 1987), 275-278.

4. Joseph S. Height, *Paradise on the Steppe: The Odyssey of a Pioneering People* (Ann Arbor: McNaughton and Gunn, 1989), 143.

5. Arnold H. Marzolf, *Let's Talk German-Russian, with Ernschtina un Hanswurst* (Grand Forks, N. Dak.: University of North Dakota Press, 1990), 11-17.

6. Height, *Paradise*, 143.

7. The Reverend S. Joachim, "Towards An Understanding of the Russia Germans," *Concordia College Occasional Papers #1* (Moorhead, Minn.: Concordia College Committee on Publications, August 1939).

8. Timothy L. and Rosalina Kloberdanz, *Thunder on the Steppe: Volga German Folklife in a Changing Russia* (Lincoln: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1993), 121.

9. *Ibid.*, 135-136.

Co-captain of the Wishek Badgers basketball team, Mike Herr, dribbles the ball in a game at the Wishek High School gym. Author Ron Vossler is pictured in the inset. Both photographs appeared in the 1965 school annual. Courtesy of Wishek High School.



In addition to the proverbs and nicknames, German-Russians played with language, using nonsense sayings, rhymes, and greetings that were both humorous and effective in making a point. For example, when I was a child and hurt my finger, my grandmother would rub the afflicted area and repeat rhymed jingles in a sing-song voice. These jingles, with their often incongruous humor, helped us forget the hurt. Two popular ones that I remember are these:

Heila, heila, Katz dreck. (Heal, heal, cat poop.)
Morgen fruh isch alles wek. (In the morning everything will be gone.)

A, B, C. (German sounds = aw, bay, tsay)
Katz liegt im Schnee. (Cat lays in the snow.)
Der Schnee geht wek. (Snow goes away.)
Katz liegt im Dreck. (Cat lays in the dirt.)
Dreck geht wek. (Dirt goes away.)
Katz isch verreckt. (Cat is dead.)

These chants and rhymes bear some similarities to, or might have their origins in *Brauche*, the German-Russian folk-healing tradition, still practiced in some places in south-central North Dakota to this day.¹⁰

Chants of that nature could also be adapted for other purposes, like one heard at the McIntosh County boys' basketball championship in 1965. There was a long-standing, heated athletic rivalry between Wishek and neighboring Ashley, both of which were settled by German-Russian immigrants. During a close game, as a Wishek player stood at the free-throw line, the Ashley cheering section bellowed out, in unison, a resounding German dialect cheer. Besides attempting to disturb the player's concentration, the chant also betrayed, perhaps, how the younger generation felt about the

ethnic foods with which we were all familiar:

Blutwurst, Leverwurst, Schwatamaga, Speck! Veeshok Hochschule, wek wek wek!

(Blood sausage, liver sausage, head cheese, fat! Wishek High School, go away, go away, go away.)

In traditional German-Russian life there were a variety of children's rhymes, tongue-twisters, or nonsense phrases that were both a source of verbal fun and a way adults fended off curious children's inquiries.¹¹ Here are some examples:

Was isch? Mehr Wasser als Fisch.
 (What is it? More water than fish.)

Hasch Hunger? Schlupf in e Gagumer.
 (Hungry? Crawl in a cucumber.)

Wo geht's du nah? Ins Loch, Bohne lese.
 (Where are you going? Into a hole, to pick beans.)

In German-Russian life, there were also a variety of phrases exchanged when meeting someone, and these short expressions—seasoned with humor, moral insight, teasing, risqué references, or just hard truth—were the perfect vehicle of expression for a hard-working people who did not want to waste time chatting, but who also wanted to have a little *Spass*, or fun. The following is a one-liner said to departing visitors, who might ponder this conundrum on their long way home:

Fahr nit so schnell, aber macht das Hamm kommsch.
 (Don't drive too fast, but make home come quickly.)

Other playful exchanges—in which the reply to the

initial query "Wie geht's?" may have several meanings to a German dialect speaker, including a risqué one:

Question: *Wie geht's?* (How are things going?)

Reply: *Was nit hangst muss stehe.* (Whatever doesn't hang must stand.)

The following exchanges seem to fit into a category termed "ritual insults," a kind of repartee said to "reduce tension" and maintain social order. One can only conjecture about the value of these exchanges in a small, closed village of German colonists in Russia, where social order was important.¹²

Two people meet after a long time. One of them says, "I haven't seen you for a long time."

The other replies, "Yah, what did I put in your way?" ("*Was han ich in der weg gelegt?*")¹³

Some "ritual insults" involve replies to "thank you"; these replies might use either playful nonsense rhyming, or a proverb-like retort, as in this example:

First person: *Dangashay.* (Thank you.)

Second person: *Du hash so langa Zahn.* (You have such long teeth.)

First person: *Dangashay.* (Thank you.)

Second person: *Bezah die Schulde dann brauchts nit danke.* (Pay your debts, then you wouldn't have to thank anyone.)¹⁴

In German-Russian humor there is also a rich tradition of "linguistic humor." This kind of humor includes overall misuse of language, on purpose and otherwise, along with puns, plays on words, and "reinterpretation of familiar words and phrases."¹⁵ German-Russian jokes often misinterpret, on purpose, similar-sounding German dialect words, to create double entendres. Sometimes alternate meanings are embedded in the dialect phrase itself, as in the following example: A person might ask you in German dialect if you know someone, to which you might reply: "*Ich wass wer du meinsch, aber ich wass yah nit wo ich ihn her nema sot.*" ("I know who you mean, but I don't know where I should take that person.") The "*wo ich ihn her nema sot*" can be understood literally, as in "where should I take that person," but to the German dialect speaker, that phrase

also has another, sexual meaning.

Some of the short humor of the German-Russians can be quite complex. For example, they occasionally combine nonsense ditties, greetings, and bits of two languages, English and German—all in one or two phrases. Punning of this sort—using similar sounding words with different meanings from two different languages—is termed "interlingual," as in the following examples in which the second speaker deliberately and playfully responds with an English word that sounds like a word the German speaker used:

First person: *Was isch los?* (What is wrong?)

Second person: Bread *isch* loafs [loaves].

First person: *Wie geht's?* (How are things going?)

Second person: The gate's ok, but the fence is broke.¹⁶

Some "interlingual" humor is playful, other examples are nonsensical. Behind the silliness, though, some statements of this kind of humor carry another message. For example, one might infer from the veiled hint, "the fence is broke," that things might not be going too well for the speaker.

Out of expediency, or just by accident, English and German phrases are sometimes blended, creating odd linguistic constructions that are often amusing, as in this example involving words North Dakotans know only too well: "below zero." The German have a similar phrase, *unternull*. Once a friend of my brother's mixed them together as he came in from outside and said, "Yah, it must really be 'under-below' today."

There was a similar linguistic construction—this is said to be a true story—which grew out of an encounter in a grocery store in Wishek:

An elderly gentleman was relating a bit of local news to a fellow shopper, who wanted to know about the origin of the information. Disturbed that his credibility was being questioned, the elderly fellow telling the story replied with a huff, "Yah, I saw it standing in the newspaper," which is a literal translation from the German phrase, *es steht*, which is used in German and German dialect to indicate material that is printed, as in the Bible, or in a newspaper.

In contrast to these examples of shorter humor, German-Russians also had longer jokes, which used a

10. Arends, *Dakota Germans*, 193.

11. *Ibid.*, 93.

12. Mahadev L. Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 173.

13. Roland Ketterling. Interview of jokes, sayings, and stories

recorded in Wishek, North Dakota, on August 29, 1998.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Apte, 179.

16. *Ibid.*, 181.

narrative or story line—some of which have been collected by scholar Joseph Height. Using references to life on the steppes and to Russian locales, these jokes obviously derive from German colonies in Russia. Tame in content, moralistic in tone, these examples illustrate typical German-Russian attitudes and values, such as the balance needed between faith in God and reliance upon one's own resources.¹⁷ Height remarked on the German-Russians' lack of Puritan inhibitions and their penchant for ribald anecdotes, but he offers no examples, and there are no collected narrative jokes, or, for that matter, one-liners or other short humor, that illustrate that ribaldry.¹⁸

Some of the longer narrative jokes collected here from the oral tradition of the German-Russians are dicentious, but, more importantly, they also contain a gold mine of information about German-Russian life, world view, and attitudes. Imbedded within them are markers of the long, and often difficult, historical journey of this ethnic group. Some of the people who told these jokes often insisted that they "actually happened," that they were based on real people and incidents. I was telling a dialect joke about a hired man named Hoff, during a formal presentation at an international Germans from Russia convention in the summer of 1999, when a fellow in the audience who was waving his hand excitedly, blurted out, "That's me! That happened to me! I'm that Hoff!"

Another example of a narrative joke that reveals much about the humor of German-Russians is the story, "Not Until the Combine is Paid," translated here into English.

Once there was a very poor farm family with three boys. The oldest, who was eighteen, told his father one day, "I'd really like to have a car."

"No," his father said. "We just bought a combine. Until that combine is paid you won't get a car."

Several days later the second boy, who was fourteen, told the father, "I'd really like to have a bicycle." "No," his father said. "Your older brother won't get a car, and you won't get a bicycle—not until the combine is paid for." Finally the youngest, who was five, went up to his father one day and said, "Father, I'd really like a tricycle." "No," his father said. "The other boys won't get anything, and neither will you—not until that combine is paid."

Oh, my! The youngest ran away, screaming and throwing a tantrum—until he looked up and saw a hen coming across the yard, with the rooster in pursuit. When the rooster tried to get onto the hen, the boy booted the rooster aside and said, "You Satan, you can walk too, until that combine is paid for." ("*Du Sutton, laufsch au bisch der Combine bezahlt isch.*")¹⁹

Many longer German-Russian jokes contain many of the same elements as in "Not Until the Combine is Paid." The narrative, or story line, is in English, German, or a combination of the two languages. The punch line is invariably in German dialect, and the joke includes a number of references to rural prairie life, along with a few key English words, which are clear indicators that the joke takes place in America. Identifiably German-Russian, these long jokes focus on issues that grow out of their experiences, moral attitudes, or values. In "Not Until the Combine Is Paid," the concern is with making careful purchases and prudent use of money. But the "Combine" joke is different from the narrative jokes already collected by scholars in one major respect: the humor hinges on a sexual reference in the punch line.

Most of the longer jokes I have collected and translated include, in addition to the German dialect punch line, other shorter comedic elements, like name calling in the "Combine" joke, "*Du Sutton*" (You Satan), or colorful exclamations like "*Grossa Elend*" (Great Misery), such as appears in the rock-hauling joke on page 57. These phrases, when given verbal emphasis by the joke teller, seem to operate as cues for laughter, at least to German-Russian ears.

Some jokes gathered from the German-Russian oral tradition use other groups, such as Englishmen, Russians, or, as in our next example, Norwegians, as the butt of the joke:

Once there was a young man who went into the hospital for an operation on his brain. After they'd removed his brain, they placed it in clear fluid of a glass jar so it could be examined. When the nurses and doctors gathered around to observe the brain more closely, the young man escaped. They hunted high and low for him, but they just couldn't find him. For three days the hunt went on, but to no avail. They had his brain, but not him. After three years, they finally found him. He was being held in a Norwegian school. And he was the teacher.²⁰

German-Russians not only aimed their jokes at other ethnic groups; they also targeted German-Russians from other locales, or at German-Russians of different faiths from themselves. In Russia, German colonists kept to their own village and faith, whether it was Catholic or Protestant. On the American prairie the tradition of marrying within one's own faith continued until well past the middle of the twentieth century. Here is an example of a short, fairly simple joke, which turns the table on a couple of prejudiced Protestants:

Once there was a Catholic nun who broke her arm. She was walking down the street in town when she was approached by two old bachelors

The A. L. Geil and Co. store in Braddock, one of the first communities established in Emmons County, in the "German-Russian triangle" of North Dakota.



who asked what happened because her arm was in a cast. "Oh," the nun said, "I fell in the bathtub."

As they walked on, one of the bachelors turned to the other and said, "What's a bathtub?" The other said, "How should I know? I'm not Catholic." ("Wie soll ich wisse? Ich bin nit Katholische.")²¹

German-Russian humor has much in common with Jewish humor, which has so enriched American life. They share a root language; Yiddish is a German dialect spelled with Hebrew letters. In addition to these similarities, both ethnic groups have jokes which contain more harshness than merriment. That kind of humor, in Jewish tradition called "laughing with lizards," is illustrated by the following:

Mrs. Bloomberg was complaining to her neighbor about the rats in her house: "I tried rat poison, but it doesn't work."

"Have you tried giving them rat biscuits?" asked her neighbor.

"If they don't like what we have in our kitchen," Mrs. Bloomberg said, "Let them starve."

As one can see from the next joke, which comes from McIntosh County, North Dakota, that type of bitter humor is not uncommon to German-Russians:

In the first years on the prairie, there was an unmarried man named Jacob, who one day went to his neighbor and said, "I've just taken up a claim of land, which has many stones on it. So now I need a wife to help me pick those rocks."

The neighbor said that he knew just the woman for Jacob, and directed him to a nearby farm. "Eva is tough and strong. She'll get those stones picked for you."

Several months passed, and the neighbor finally meets up with this Jacob again. He asks Jacob how it went with Eva. Jacob replies, "During my first visit to Eva's house, I thought that she could bake really good raisin bread. When I started to eat it, I found out those weren't raisins but flies. I married her anyway, and, *Grossa Elend!* (Great Misery!) I never would have believed that those rocks could get picked so fast."

"I told you Eva was just the person to help you,"

17. Joseph S. Height, *Memories of the Black Sea Germans: Highlights of Their History and Heritage* (Bismarck, N. Dak.: Richtman's Press and associated German-Russian sponsors, 1979), 216-221.

18. Height, *Paradise*, 143.

19. Curtis Schultz. Cassette tape of German-Russian dialect jokes recorded at Germans from Russia Heritage Society International Convention in Aberdeen, South Dakota, Summer, 1991.

20. *Ibid.*

the neighbor said. "But I still don't know how you managed to get those rocks picked so fast."

"Well, I'll tell you," Jacob said. "She was in the box, and ran the whip. I was out in the fields picking stones. Better a heart attack than a crack from Eva's whip." ("Sie war im box mit grossa Beitsch, und ich, ich war daraus und hap Stan gelast. Lieve ein Herz schlak wie ein Eva schlak.")²²

That theme of adjustment to American life, and the accompanying economic struggle, was common in Jewish jokes of the previous era.

Some scholars have indicated that the kinds of oral humor that survive in a society are those relevant to, or which reflect an important issue of, the existing cultural situation.²³ In modern Jewish humor, as the fortunes of that group have improved, jokes about the struggle to gain an economic foothold have disappeared. But with the German-Russians, many of whom have been weathering the current farm crisis, jokes of that kind still circulate. For example, on a German-Russian web site, one still can find jokes like the following:

A woman of German-Russian descent whose husband had just died went to the small-town newspaper office to make sure that the obituary of her recently deceased husband was printed. "Fifty cents a word," the obituary editor said.

"Let it read: Konrad Scherer died," the widow replied.

"But there is a seven-word minimum for all obituaries," the editor said.

"Well, then," the widow replied, without missing a beat, "Let it read: Konrad Scherer died. 1984 pickup for sale."²⁴

Another theme which Jewish humor introduced was that of the "loser" or "the fool," a character which runs counter to the more heroic American folk type. This "fool" was the extreme version of the "little man," or common man, whose strength is sometimes in his weakness, like the Jew who finds himself on a battlefield, and cries out, "Stop shooting. Someone might, God forbid, lose an eye."²⁵

There are a lot of "fool," or "noodle" jokes in German-Russian humor, too. Some of these derive from immigrant themes, the stranger in a strange land experience. Here is a "fool" joke, set in rural south-central North Dakota during the automobile era, but it reflects prairie isolation and the continuing adjustment of traditional ways to the ways of the wider world:

There was a hardworking farmer who lived near the small town of Streeter in south-central North Dakota. Only rarely did he venture from his farm, and then just to deliver his crops to the town elevator, or to get supplies. But one day he decided



German-Russian farmer from Emmons County, Herman Becker, moving a large rock from a field with his gas tractor and a heavy-duty chain. SHSND 281-25.E-6

to venture out and visit his cousin, who lived a ways to the south, in the small town of Ellendale.

With his wife beside him, he drove his car onto the first highway near his home. The sign said "Highway 32," so that was how fast he drove. It was a slow journey, but eventually they came to another blacktop road, and this time the sign said "Highway 46," so he drove a little faster. Finally, when they came to another road, which was marked "Highway 281," the farmer turned to his wife and said, sternly, "Hold onto yourself. Now we're going to drive fast." ("Hep dich Weib, jetzt fahren wir wiedich schnell.")

Ethnic humor may reflect or be inspired by the relationship between ethnic groups in a geographical area. For example, when they first arrived in this country, some German-Russians were called "dumb Rooshians." This lack of understanding and prejudice escalated during the World War I era, particularly in areas less isolated than North Dakota's German-Russian triangle. In Texas, South Dakota, and Nebraska, the easily identifiable immigrants were viewed as unpatriotic, and, as a result, many legal restrictions were leveled against the use of the German language. There were also many threats, some of which were carried out.²⁶

That era illustrated differences between German-Russian immigrants and their neighbors. It was clear that there were differences in power, authority, and status. Scholar Mary Louise Pratt suggests that ethnic

humor often develops as a means for a minority group to fight the oppression of a dominant group, and that the minority group often uses "autoethnographic texts," along with other skills such as storytelling, parody, and bilingualism, to respond to those differences in power, authority, and status.²⁷

Here is a joke my mother sometimes told me, which we can examine in light of that theory:

In the early years on the prairie, there was an elderly German from Russia grandmother on an infrequent trip from her homestead to town to get supplies. In a dry goods store, this *alta grossmutter* browses around. The storekeeper, who has been observing her impatiently, asks her sternly in English: "What can I do for you?"

Nodding and pointing to an atomizer of perfume on the counter, our old granny holds out her hand towards him and asks, venturing into English as best she knows, if he could please "*shiet* a little into my hand." Of course, the storekeeper, who doesn't speak German, can only stare back, horrified and embarrassed at what he thinks the harmless old granny wants.

This joke is "bilingual": the text or narration completely in English, except for the one word in German dialect, *shiet*, which the storekeeper misunderstands. If we examine this joke in light of Pratt's theory, we note that the humor fights against the stereotype that German-Russians are ignorant. The storekeeper, who does not speak German dialect, represents the Main Street businessmen, most of whom were, at the time the joke is set, not German-Russian: "In the early years on the prairie." That was generally true in the town of Wishek, North Dakota, the joke's locale, as evidenced by the last names of Main Street business owners.²⁸ So our harmless granny, viewed the same way, represents the number of German-Russian farmers who had settled around the town.

From this joke we can also surmise that there might

have been some friction, or even prejudice, between some storekeepers and their German-Russian clients; or, at least, some struggle to understand each other. No doubt some German-Russian shoppers felt ignorant, or backward, not knowing much English, and the storekeepers and businessmen, viewing them the same way, might have treated them accordingly. But the ignorant person in this joke is not, of course, the German-Russian grandmother, but the clerk who does not know that *shiet* is the word for spray or pour in German dialect. (High German verb, *schutten*.) This joke seems to support the theory that German-Russians were fighting back against how the "majority" viewed them.

There are a variety of other theories which examine the role and purpose of ethnic humor. Some scholars state the obvious, that humor in general, including ethnic humor, "serves the purpose of pleasure and entertainment," and that ethnic humor, even if it uses another ethnic group as the butt of the humor—such as our earlier "brain" joke, which pokes fun at Norwegians—does not necessarily make the listeners, or the tellers of such jokes, hostile, or aggressive.²⁹

Others take a more complicated view of ethnic humor. Some scholars would agree that jokes which disparage another group, like our "brain" joke, act as a unifying force in group identity, but they also indicate that such "exoteric" jokes have their origin in "fear, mystification about, or resentment of the group to which one does not belong." The result of such jokes is that they "mold" negative attitudes towards those to whom the jokes are directed, in this case, the Norwegians.³⁰ Most interesting is that German-Russian humor—the "exoteric jokes," the numerous folk proverbs, and even the "ritual" greetings familiar to only those of German-Russian background—is seen by at least one scholar as evidence of this ethnic group's isolation, either geographic or cultural, or both.³¹

There are other views of ethnic humor which emphasize that jokes of this sort are not destructive, or negative, but actually work to "mediate conflicts between groups" by bringing differences, and stereotypes

21. *Ibid.*

22. Ketterling.

23. Apte, 264.

24. Germans from Russia list-serv: <http://www.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/gerrus/>

25. Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 23.

26. See Frederick C. Luecke, *Germans in the New World: Essays in the History of Immigration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 31-47, and Gordon Iseminger, "Germans, Russians, or Americans?" in *North Dakota History* (Spring 1992, Vol. 59, No. 2).

27. Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone" in *Reading the Lives of Others* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995), 183-194.

28. *Spirit of Wishek: Wishek, North Dakota's Golden Jubilee*

Anniversary Book (Dubuque, Iowa: Hoerman Press, 1948), 3-5.

29. Apte, 145.

30. William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), 46.

31. *Ibid.*, 49.

32. For a broad discussion of the role of ethnic humor, see John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter Laughing," in *American Quarterly* 38 (1986); Lois Leveen, "Only When I Laugh: Textual Dynamics of Ethnic Jokes," and Holger Kersten, "Using the Immigrants' Voice: Humor and Pathos in Nineteenth Century 'Dutch' Dialect Texts," both in *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 21.4 (Winter 1996).

out into the open. This view suggests that ethnic humor's value lies in its ability to cast a critical eye on the dominant culture; it is important because ethnic group members are more sensitive to issues of identity; it helps to mark and clarify boundaries, reinforce a sense of collective identity, and to "define ethnicity positively." Though some ethnic jokes may be understood to confirm stereotypes, those same jokes also show that the teller of the joke is aware of, and intends to overcome, that stereotype.³²

Further study of German-Russian humor, and ethnic humor in general, is important because, as citizens of a multicultural democracy, we are all concerned with finding the best way to live together, to become full members of American society.

In our current era, with so many different ethnic groups and nationalities becoming citizens of our country, German-Russians serve as a good example of a group that has already gone through a lengthy process of assimilation into the American mainstream. Much can be learned from the experience of this ethnic group, who, despite marked differences with mainstream attitudes and ideas, eventually merged with and enriched the American character. My view is that humor, which is essentially democratic, creates community, and that one way German-Russians adapted was by means of their humor—which allowed them to endure difficult lives, get along with other groups, and keep part of their culture and birthright, as they made the long journey from their old peasant life into the modernity of America. The following old German-Russian saying, used when people depart from each other, shows the combination of good will and humor, tempered with a healthy dose of hard-knock experience: "*Nichts fur Unglück, aber sau kiesel fur streu Hut.*" ("I wish you nothing but good luck, but please, as you go, wear this metal slop pail for a straw hat, just in case.") **ND**

About the Author

With a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Arizona State University, and a master's degree in English from the University of North Dakota, **Ron Vossler** is a native of Wishek, North Dakota, of Black Sea German descent. His writing credits include an award-winning documentary film (*Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe/Children of the Prairie*), a book of short stories (*Horse, I Am Your Mother*), a book of translations (*Pilgrims, In The Valley of Tears: Letters from the "Terror Famine"*), and many contributions to journals, magazines, and anthologies. He is currently completing his fifth book, *Homelands: A German Russian Family Album*.



German-Russian grossmutter (grandmother), Regina Bender Leingang, was born in Steinberg in Odessa, Russia, but immigrated to St. Anthony, North Dakota, where this photograph was taken, ca. 1920. Her husband was Nikolai P. Leingang. Courtesy of her great-grandson, Brian R. Austin, Mandan, North Dakota.

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